

myle yan tay



Catskull

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“Myle Yan Tay’s debut novel is a sharp, dark look at the education system as a potential site of violence and harm. This is writing that doesn’t flinch and dares the reader to sit with and in discomfort while excavating deeply existential questions about what defines who we are as a society and the individuals who build (or break) it.”

—Pooja Nansi, Author of *We Make Spaces Divine*

“Myle Yan Tay has crafted a taut, confident narrative that flirts with—then upends and reinvigorates—the superhero genre, weaving in the beauty and pain of contemporary Singapore society. The voices ring true; the characters gently but firmly lodge themselves in your head. These fictional creations—and their obsessions and personal demons—are all too real. This compelling debut will stay with you a long time.”

—Huzir Sulaiman, Playwright and
Joint Artistic Director of Checkpoint Theatre

“In *catskull*, Myle Yan Tay has inked a spiky, fevered fantasy of teenage alienation. Young Ram drifts through his A-levels by day and commits masked crimes by night, fuelled by a volatile brew of righteous anger and simple nihilism—combined in unknown and unstable parts.”

—Jolene Tan, Author of *After the Inquiry*

catskull
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This book contains references to topics such as physical violence, racially insensitive language, discrimination and abuse of migrant workers, and themes of sexual assault, sexual abuse and paedophilia. While the content of this novel is fictional, these topics reflect real issues.

We recognise that the ways in which readers might respond to and deal with these issues may vary, as our relationships to these topics are unique. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or not in the right headspace to experience the story, do put the book down and talk to someone about how you feel, or consult resources printed at the back of the book.

the first body, i found

1.

Under my bed, I keep a box.

Inside the box are hidden things.

Bits of memories.

Perforated pages from a yearbook.

Newspaper headlines I could not look away from. The death of a small child. A teenager commits suicide. A hit-and-run of a man, puking into a gutter.

A tear-stained Chinese exam.

A well-worn rope, stolen from my brother's army equipment. When I can't sleep, when the void of my future fills my head, I close my eyes and tie, untie, re-tie its curve into a noose until I fall asleep. Its strands are fraying.

A poor sketch of an ear, missing a chunk.

An army-issued knife, also swiped from Logan, who had to pay twenty dollars for a new one when he couldn't find it during an inspection.

A notebook of scribblings, urges etched into pages, a catalogue of impulses, actions that spin in my head, unless I put them down onto paper.

Underneath all of that, beneath the other parts of me I keep hidden in this box, wrapped in newspaper, sits my most precious possession. When the rope cannot send me to sleep,

I take it out and hold it. I run my fingers along its curved dome, like I am pressing my fingers against the flat of my teeth. I rub it like a lamp. And then I fall asleep.

In the morning, I tuck it back into my box.

Then the box goes back under my bed.

I slide it under, deep, pushing first with my arm, then my leg.

Only I can ever know about my box.

My box of shame.

2.

Kass always wore a long-sleeved sweater, navy blue. A thick fleece, lost in Singapore.

I would ask her how she stood the heat, and she would shrug, tell me, it is not that hot, though I could see the sweat pooling on the tip of her nose. I was always tempted to reach forward, to brush it away before it drips off her, but the two of us do not touch.

Her sweater was so frequent, I associated its dark hue with her more than our uniform's pale yellow. I rarely saw her in that sickly colour, the same colour covering my brown skin, day in, day out, its fabric turning closer and closer to death the nearer we grew to A-Levels.

Kass isn't in my class now. We were childhood friends, neighbours in Bedok, before she moved. Elaborate adventures crafted between us, a longkang a dungeon, a metal fence a tank's façade. She always had the ideas, I just went along with her, trailing behind her, playing the squire to her knight, the butler to her prince, the minister in her cabinet. Kass had such fun ideas, before her mother started taking the sleeping pills, one at every meal, before her father, before he started to become something other.

We only ended up in the same junior college because her parents forced her to take triple science for O-Levels. Her father wanted her to become a doctor. His nephew, Kass' cousin, was on-track to becoming a lawyer. Her father did not like to lose.

Kass barely scraped through the sciences, choosing not to excel out of spite. I eked by as well, but unlike Kass, I had actually tried.

And now we were in the same middling junior college, she one of the top Literature students, her essays scanned

and photocopied as model answers and me, a blip, an unnoticeable smudge on an attendance sheet.

I had not been special since Primary 6. Teachers no longer looked at me, paid me attention. I wasn't worth the effort to coach into greatness or to lift from the slums. I simply was.

3.

I only listen to music when I'm riding my bike. I repeat the same soundtracks over and over again, cycling through them as I pedal across Singapore.

For the last year, it's been the *Akira* soundtrack, by Geinoh Yamashirogumi. The chimes and xylophones bounce around in my head while I head to school, its pulsing keyboard on my way back. I ripped the tracks off YouTube.

It deeply concerns my parents, who worry that I will not hear a car honking, or a dog barking, or a man screaming.

Kass hates my music. She doesn't understand why I always listen to things without words. Sometimes, when I walk Kass home, she plugs into her music and I walk in silence. I listen to the click of my bicycle wheel, a soft metallic noise, regularly ticking. I hear snippets of music through her headphones. A drumbeat, a low bass. Below that, the chirping of my wheels, the gears clicking as I pedal up the steep slope leading to Kass' house.

4.

He is bleeding out in my arms. The knife went deep into his gut. My hand is warm with his blood, dripping onto the floor, onto shards of glass, onto mud from their backyard. The side of my head is numb, from the baseball bat rolling away from his body.

I don't scream. I am trying to take the knife out but I am doing it wrong. I am doing it wrong. I am taking it out and putting it back in. Out. In.

There is a pool on the floor.

5.

Even when Kass stays at her aunt Antonia's house, she'll walk with me to my house, then take the bus from there. It's rare that I actually ride home, 'cause Kass wouldn't be able to keep up. When we were reunited in Junior College, she told me I should just ride ahead. It's silly to clog the pavement, walking my bike. But I insisted. Eventually she relented.

I wish I had an aunt like hers, with a giant home, a room just for me, cupboards filled with snacks. I only have an uncle, but I don't get to talk about him.

Sometimes after MMA, Kass and I eat dinner at the KFC in Siglap before heading home. Kass never eats but she watches me wolf down a Zinger and two pieces of chicken, normally a coleslaw, and some fries if I'm feeling hungry.

"Ram, you leave so much. If you ate everything off the bone, you wouldn't need to buy so much."

On the rare occasion when Kass eats, she leaves it completely bone-dry. No meat, no cartilage. She says that when she was younger, she used to chew on the bone. She has long white teeth, and I can picture ivory snapping between them.

Sometimes, Kass will pay for my food. She'll ask me to buy a coke, and passes me \$20, tells me to keep the change.

I never object. I have \$30 to spend a week, using the allowance my dad gives me. I spend half of my allowance at KFC and survive off economic bee hoon for the rest of the week. Once Kass told me that Auntie Antonia gave her \$800 in a Chinese New Year angpao. She puts half of it into a savings account for her younger brother, but still has more than enough for herself, and often, me.

When there are breaks during lectures, I buy Kass and myself five seaweed chicken. It's the only time I get to treat

her. Tuesday afternoons, the auntie already knows my order whenever I head towards the stall. Three for me, two for Kass. \$1.50.

6.

Sometimes, when I walk into school through the front-gates, past the security guard who only recognises me because my skin looks like his, I imagine a knot snapping inside me.

That knot, taut, pulled into my core, stretched from the top of my head to the soles of my feet.

That knot, breaking loose, when Jiahao walks by me, slapping me on my back after the security guard has waved at me, asking me if the security guard is my uncle.

I think of my knot when I cannot sleep, when I am tying the noose. I think of how good it would feel to let it snap.

7.

When he would visit on weekends, Uncle Arun would take me and Logan down to the playground. I was too small to do much of anything, other than hobble around and fall. Logan would climb all over, up and down the blue slide, across that fading red castle, and Uncle Arun would chase him.

We called him Uncle, but in the way it always is, he was not a real uncle, not in the sense of blood. He was my father's best friend in school, the two of them often mistaken for siblings, my father the responsible elder and Uncle Arun the reckless baby brother.

When Uncle Arun lost his job, he would take us down to the playground any time we liked. But the trips felt emptier, Logan tugging on Uncle Arun's sleeve, Uncle Arun saying he was too tired to play, taking swigs from a little bottle in his back pocket.

They always say I am just like him. But I don't know who he was.

8.

“Pay attention, Ram”.

I’m lying flat on my back, and Matthew is offering me his hand. He yanks me to my feet, and I almost fall over again.

“Too busy lady-watching right?”

I give Matthew an awkward smile and he laughs.

Matthew is my sparring partner. He’s a tall boy, thick black hair, always too long, but the discipline master and our coach, Mr. Ong, never scolds him. He’ll come by with his whistle, tussle Matthew’s hair, and give him a grin.

“Trying to be a K-Pop star, is it, Matthew?”

Mr. Ong always pronounces the t’s in Matthew with a sharp cut, the h almost invisible.

I’ve known Matthew since Secondary 2, when we were assigned the seats beside each other. He towered over me even seated. He would occasionally joke, apologising for the shadow he cast over me.

Matthew was the captain of our secondary school football team, and was scouted to play nationally. But his shins couldn’t take the pressure and he decided to join us in MMA. He says he likes the tightness of it, how near you are to the opponent. In football, you look for space, on or off the ball. But on this foam mat, you want to be close. Upfront and personal, is how he puts it.

“Eh come la, Ram. Coach not looking. We just do some light sparring. No face.”

Matthew hates Thursday training. Thursday is when we wrestle. No strikes. Just pin your opponent to the ground. Matthew says it’s no fun, without the sharp rush of adrenaline, the sting of a punch.

“No la, Matthew. We just stick to what coach says.”

Matthew sighs.

Kass' partner is Jia Yi, who is almost a head shorter than her. Jia Yi never trims her nails before training. Kass' hands had little gashes all over after last week's training.

Jia Yi lunges at Kass, who sidesteps. She grabs Jia Yi by the waist and tosses her to the ground. Kass is easily the strongest of the girls. She could probably beat Matthew. Maybe me.

"Ready or not, Ram. Wrestling Ram."

"Ready."

Matthew and I stand off, against each other. My hands are in front of me, smacking his away whenever they come too close. I already know, Matthew won't last long in the patience game. I only have to bide my time, before he loses his cool and rushes me.

After a fake swipe, he lunges, trying to grab my waist. He's made a mistake, he's gone low. I drop my weight on top of him and he tumbles. But his arms catch his fall and he refuses the takedown. He sweeps my leg with his arm, and I fall off him.

We both stay low, on our knees. Hands back up.

Jia Yi shrieks from the other side of the gym. I look up for a moment and see blood on her fingertips.

I start to stand to see what's happening, but Matthew takes the opportunity. He seizes me and tries to pin me. I twist at the last second and I'm on my side. He has my arm in his hand and is pulling.

"Done, Ram?"

I say nothing. I squirm.

"Ram, tap out la."

I am still pushing.

"Ram!"

I hear a pop.

Matthew lets go, I run to Kass.

“Are you okay?”

More of the team is looking at me than Kass, having barged across the hall to reach her.

“Don’t spaz, Ram. She cut me, is all.”

Coach is wiping Kass with anti-septic. There is one long cut on her arm, seems thin. But around it, there are scars. Little mountain ridges across her arms, all the way up. They’re different colours. Pink. Purple. Some look new. None of them look like the cut from Jia Yi.

“Should be okay, Kass. Light cut. Jia Yi, how many times must I tell you to cut your bloody nails before training?”

Jia Yi whimpers.

“S-sorry, coach. Kass, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s no big deal. I barely feel it.”

Coach presses hard with the antiseptic.

“Should just sting a little. That’s how you know it’s killing the germs. Eh. Ram. What happened to your shoulder?”

9.

Kass was named after a prophet. Cassandra. A Trojan princess who saw the future. Her premonitions warned her of bad times to come but no one listened.

I never understood why her parents gave her such a cursed name. I would rather be stupid and heard, than wise and ignored.

Her younger brother is named Paris, a skinny, black-haired boy, with the same dark eyes as Kass. He's five years younger than her, stuttering into puberty. Occasionally he joins us at KFC if Kass has to get him from school. He likes to try sparring with me while she waits for the bus, and sometimes hits too hard.

During the June holidays, when Kass has to take care of Paris, she brings him to my house in the day, when my parents are at work. The two of us will play rocket wars in *Halo* while she barely watches. Lately, he's been trying to get me to play *Minecraft* with him on Kass' laptop. But it strikes me as too kiddy.

Paris is probably going to be taller than me, he's already one head shorter than me with five years of growing to go. Kass' father is a giant, a former sportsman who used to play shot-put nationally. Kass was in track and field for a few years, and clearly shared her father's gift. She was on-track to play in the SEA Games, but broke her wrist two months before try-outs started.

Now Paris is her father's last hope. He carves out time of his busy schedule to take Paris to three weekly training sessions. I would ask Kass what her father's job is, but I know better than to bring him up.

My parents named me after Rama, from the Ramayana. A great hero, they told me. I have never read it. My brother is Lakshman, Rama's brother in the Ramayana. But he goes by Logan now.

Additional Support

If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or would like to talk about your emotions while experiencing *catskull*, you may wish to seek support from the following hotlines and organisations based in Singapore:

Mental health support

Over The Rainbow text-based chat support: otrlistens.net

AWARE's Women's Care Centre: 1800 777 5555

Samaritans of Singapore: 1-767 / 1800-221-4444

Touch Community Services: 1800 377 2252

Support for survivors of physical abuse

AWARE's Sexual Assault Care Centre: +65 6779 0282

Pave: +65 6555 0390

National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline:
1800 777 0000

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